

by Chuck Kleinhans
review of film screening
Pacific Film Archives, Berkeley, 6 Oct 87

Nathaniel Dorsky

Pneuma (1977-83) 29 min., silent, color
17 Reasons Why (1985-87) 20 min., silent, color
Alaya (1976-87, 28 min., silent, color

Nathaniel Dorsky chooses to work with film in a technologically marginal way. For over a decade he has filmed mostly with out of date 16mm reversal stocks, selectively exposing and developing them to exploit their unusual difference from the norm of uniformity and perfect matching. Relatively inexpensive and easy to work with for the artisan filmmaker, reversal stock contributed to the core vision and style of the New American Cinema of the Sixties and Seventies until phased out during the drastic change to video in the 16mm news, commercial, and industrial sector.

Dorsky's pursuit of antique film stocks might seem perverse or nostalgic until one sees the results. Because the emulsion has physically changed, in a usually unpredictable way, variation becomes the norm. The result gives Dorsky the opportunity to modulate color, grain, and sometimes the very surface of the film. In Pneuma swarming fields of grain present an amazing record of the interaction of light and photochemistry in sections the filmmaker deliberately underexposed and overdeveloped and in other sections, which were processed without exposure, a documentation of chemical decay. The title refers to the "soul" in Stoic thought and by extension the technological magic of photochemical process in cinematography. By changes of scale (produced by optically enlarging the grain pattern) and color (from shot to shot) Dorsky modulates and develops an abstract screen into wild Brownian motion. Fascination with the screen itself, since there is no recorded image to recognize, provides the pleasure, with some changes as the filmmaker moves from one stock to another. But editing and rhythm are minor concerns here. Instead the pulsing screen as a color field becomes the central occasion, but the very duration of the piece is telling after a time. Can anyone remain totally aesthetically engaged with a work that goes on for a long time with minimal change or difference? Probably not.

Even Snow and Frampton produce nodding off, mental lists of things to do, and thoughts of the next meal among the most sophisticated viewers.

17 Reasons Why, shot in 8mm cameras, shown as unslit16mm original, provides four images, the left and right sides showing vertically adjoining frames. With extensive single framing and short shots, Dorsky produces a kinetic screen. Adding to the effect are multiple exposures of some images and the use of old stock, some of which has a cracked emulsion. The film plays color and texture off against representation of the recorded image. Flicker and abstraction combine with frantic motion as we see faces of friends and acquaintances, street scenes, closeups of grass and leaves, and odd objects. The film expands the potential of Pneuma by indicating a world "out there" beyond the emulsion and screen while never letting us forget the physical facts of photochemical deterioration and projection. As the film progresses it seems a collection of odd things: people are sometimes portrait heads, sometimes seen only as shadows on a sidewalk, and they are constantly matched with images that seem either peculiar or virtually random or selected for line or form. But in a masterful gesture, the film builds to an increasingly kaleidoscopic density of change and ends in a frenetic mixture of objects, forms, and textures, becoming an overloaded 4th of July fireworks explosion of color, light, pattern, and composition.

In Alaya Dorsky returns to a restrained screen and concentrates on a single represented subject--sand. But it is always sand in motion, with changes of scale from macro closeup filling the frame with boulder-like grains to long shots of sand dune landscapes. The wind exists in the film as an unseen but constant presence, blowing the sand into endlessly shifting patterns. We begin to see sand as almost a viscous liquid, forming and changing. Still using different film stocks, usually outdated, and changing the usual procedures for exposure and development, Dorsky's earlier concern with photochemical grain is here multiplied with the representation of grains of sand. While there is a profilmic referent--moving sand--since we are often denied a true sense of scale, except when an insect or leaf appears, the film disorients the audience. Transport speed is not always obvious either, and the resulting uncertainty about what is seen calls for a constant shifting and readjustment

of expectation, view, and appreciation. The screen becomes an abstract field at times and then shifts back into a referential frame, producing an evocative beauty.

Shown together in sequence, Dorsky's trilogy gives a testimony to the maker's desire to add another device, another modulation, to the potentials of filmmaking. Yet he finds it in the most marginal of places--outdated reversal stocks. In his program notes for Pneuma, he observes, "with the present twilight of reversal reality this collection has become a fond farewell to these short-lived but hardy emulsions." Rather than emphasizing the experimental (for experiments imply always the possibility of reproducing the results in another trial), Dorsky plays with the unknown potential of his leftover stock. The artist's judgement comes into play in selection while editing the finished work. The result is unique work, expressing the maker's quirky love for orphaned reversal film.

Technically and technologically, Dorsky seems to be exploring a dead end. But aesthetically he continues the concern of Brakhage and others for creating new ways of seeing, new visions and visionary processes. Where Romantic aestheticians found beauty even in organic decay, Dorsky finds beauty in the chemical decay of emulsion and the physical disintegration of the earth's foundation. Alaya, inspired by a Buddhist teacher, is a contemplative accomplishment of distinction, achieved with variety and finesse. It gains much by being seen as the third of a series for the full range of Dorsky's devices and delights become more evident in it. Exploring a marginal byway, Dorsky makes a film of lasting value.

-----end-----

Chicago film and video maker Chuck Kleinhans co-edits Jump Cut.